BOOKS & THE ARTS.

Still Taking Their Stand

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A BAND OF PROPHETS: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years. *Edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Louisiana State University Press. 190 pp. $12.95.*

Here, in the middle of a plowed field, is a huge hand holding a fountain pen. The pen is about to inscribe something in one of the furrows. Near the hand and pen, dwarfed by them, stands a farmer leaning on a rake. He looks unimpressed.

It is a strange drawing for the dust jacket of *A Band of Prophets*, a book which celebrates the achievements of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, those twelve Southerners (including the poets Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and Donald Davidson, and the drama critic Stark Young) who defended the mores of their rural region against the corrosive impact of industrialism. Strange, because the image of the pen overshadowing the farmer embodies the most familiar attack on the Agrarians.

The criticism went something like this: the Agrarians were effete literati who didn't know that farm life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. So they romanticized life on the land as an antidote to the maladies of modern industrial society. Even while they enjoyed a mobile, cosmopolitan existence, they exalted the provincial rootedness, the leisurely rhythms, the pastoral simplicity of preindustrial times. They did not realize that they couldn't have it both ways, that to enjoy freedom they had to give up traditional stability, and that in any case, history was marching inevitably toward further industrialization. Failing to appreciate the democratization of leisure and comfort brought by technological advance, the Agrarians fell victim to fantastic visions of moonlight and magnolias in the Old South. They were reactionary cranks. So, at least, we have been told—particularly by liberals and radicals—ever since the Agrarians published *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930.

Despite derision, the Agrarian critique has stubbornly survived. *A Band of Prophets* aims to redress the critical balance, to emphasize the farsightedness of the Agrarians' views. The book is the result of a conference held at Vanderbilt University to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *I'll Take My Stand*. It contains six essays and the edited transcript of a panel discussion among the three surviving Agrarians (Warren, the psychologist Lyle Lanier, the novelist Andrew Lytle) conducted by a fellow traveler, the critic Cleanth Brooks. As the title suggests, the editors and contributors agree that the Agrarians were prophetic: their voices, crying out in the wilderness a half-century ago, anticipated the critique of industrial society that appeared in the 1960s. Far from rendering *I'll Take My Stand* obsolete, Brooks asserts, developments in the recent past "have actually sharpened the issues raised by that book."

A Band of Prophets is uneven. The essays vary in quality, ranging from John Shelton Reed's lucid analysis of the Agrarians as cultural nationalists to Lewis Simpson's oracular pronouncements on "the Southern Republic of Letters." The transcribed panel discussion is hilarious, provocative and irritating. Lanier is the most eager to connect Agrarian concerns to programmatic solutions to contemporary problems—efforts to preserve depleted resources, to decentralize the energy industries or to revive the self-sufficient farm; Lytle reminisces about the good old days at Vanderbilt, when there was only one campus cop; Warren rambles entertainingly from strictures on Whitman's vision of "mass man" to a tale of hippie "agrarians" in Vermont who refused to clean up the dog turds in their yard because "that's nature." Everyone has a good time, and nothing much is concluded.

The best thing about *A Band of Prophets* is that it sent me back to *I'll Take My Stand*, which is also uneven but which remains a remarkable book. There is a great deal in it to confirm its critics' harshest judgments; there is also a great deal that is fresh, courageous and well worth pondering. It blends narrowness and broadness of spirit.

The narrowness is immediately apparent. One obvious difficulty is that the authors were virtually silent on the subject of race. (Though when they did address it, as Warren did in "The Briar Patch," their paternalism differed little from that of most New Deal liberals.) And in varying degrees, in various essays, one can find elitist disdain for "the masses," slavish Anglophilia and neo-Confederate ravings about the unique virtues of the South. To be sure, this Southern emphasis grounded the Agrarians' critique, made it more than the abstract maunderings of threatened humanists in a world of machines. But the Southernism seems dated. Contrary to some assertions in *A Band of Prophets*, the South has not remained resistant to the disintegrative effects of modernization. While there are still many traditional backwaters, the dominant class of Southerners is unsurpassed in its enthusiasm for capitalist development and Republican Party politics. The polyester jet set is suckling at the corporate sow, while blacks and less affluent whites are still scrambling for the hind teat. The South's "agrarian tradition" has not weathered well in Sun Belt suburbs.

What *has* weathered well is the Agrarian indictment of industrial "progress," whether under corporate capitalist or bureaucratic socialist regimes. The Agrarians were by no means simple-minded back-to-the-landers, like Warren's hippie homesteaders; nor were they merely unreconstructed Southerners. They were acute observers and critics of everyday life under industrial capitalism, far more acute than their Marxist contemporaries in the 1930s. Take, for example, the Agrarians' comments on work and leisure. According to their "statement of principles," the modern worker's "labor is hard, its tempo is fierce, and his employment is insecure. The first principle of a good labor is that it must be effective, but the second principle is that it must be enjoyed. Labor is one of the largest items in the human career; it is a modest demand that it may partake of happiness." And "turning to consumption, as the grand end which justifies the evil of modern labor, we find that we have been deceived. We have

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more time in which to consume, and many more products to be consumed. But the tempo of our labors communicates itself to our satisfactions, and these also become brutal and hurried."

If the Agrarians grasped the affinities between work and leisure in the modern world, they also understood the intimate connections between material life and mental life. "Religion," they wrote,

> can hardly be expected to flourish in an industrial society. Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it. But nature industrialized . . . manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature. We receive the illusion of having power over nature, and lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent.

It is possible to dismiss this as sentimentality; it is also possible to see it as a remarkably concise summary of the effects of bureaucratic "rationality" on human beings' sense of cosmic order—a description of the process Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world."

The problem with the Agrarians was that whenever they sought a prebureaucratic alternative, they turned to the Old South, grossly distorting the actual conditions of life in what was, after all, a slave society growing cash crops for an international market economy. The Agrarians' Old South was a society that never existed. But as Louis Rubin points out in his introduction to the Louisiana State University Press edition of *I'll Take My Stand*, "it was a society that *should* have existed—one in which men could live as individuals and not as automatons, aware of their finiteness and their dependence on God and nature, devoted to the enhancement of the moral life in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, possessed of a sense of the deep inscrutability of the natural world." It was, in other words, a preindustrial utopia. The Agrarians' utopianism, their refusal to acquiesce in the "inevitable" process of industrialization, was in the end their greatest strength. It energized and broadened their critique, allying them with antimodern critics from John Ruskin and William Morris to Lewis Mumford.

Until recently, this antimodern tradition has received little attention in cultural debate. A naive faith in progress has charmed socialist dissenters as well as capitalist apologists. If progress has been General Electric's most important product, it has also been the philosopher's stone of left ideologues, for whom "progressive" is still an honorific term. Few thinkers at any point on the political spectrum have wanted to appear nostalgic about preindustrial communities that (they assumed) were squalid and oppressive. Left thinkers in particular have viewed such traditional values as family loyalty, local attachment and religious faith as barriers to revolutionary class consciousness and personal fulfillment. And even if they felt that power and wealth needed radical redistribution, few have questioned the cult of productivity and material progress.

But during the last two decades, the stale atmosphere of "progressive" thought has started to freshen. Historians on the left, led by E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman and Lawrence Goodwyn, have begun to show that preindustrial cultures were far more complex and fluid, more tolerant of idiosyncratic behavior, sometimes even more democratic, than had been supposed. Other left thinkers have attacked the common assumption that modernization has enhanced personal autonomy. No matter who owns the means of production, they note, the modern obsession with industrial productivity has usually promoted hierarchy rather than democracy in the workplace; and immersion in bureaucratic routine is hardly a liberation.

One can find these insights among thinkers as diverse as Raymond Williams, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Sheldon Wolin, Herbert Marcuse, Ivan Illich, Christopher Lasch and Michel Foucault. All grasp the central irony of contemporary cultural debate: that corporate capitalists are the chief enemies of the traditional values they claim to defend. In the writings of these thinkers, one can sense a dawning realization that loyalties to family, community or faith are not mere relics of an Age of Superstition; they can provide important resources for resisting the atomizing effects of ceaseless "growth."

The left seems finally to be learning from the antimodern tradition. As Brooks points out in *A Band of Prophets*, much of Lasch's argument in *The Culture of Narcissism* sounds remarkably like the Agrarians' statement of principles. This is not merely a matter of intellectual fashion; discontent with

industrial capitalism pervades popular sentiment as well. The desire to protect land and neighborhoods from the ravages of mindless development, the growing disillusionment with centralized bureaucratic authority, the revival of religious enthusiasm manipulable by demagogues but rooted in longings for a larger sense of purpose than technocratic culture provides—all these suggest the ideological bankruptcy of corporate liberalism and renewed possibilities for the left.

A problem remains. While the renewed appreciation of preindustrial cultures has ventilated thinking on the left, antimodern impulses threaten in some quarters to become as reflexive as the old "progressive" orthodoxy. The reflex is not Ludditism: no one has suggested that we give up our washing machines or typewriters, and no one (not even the most fervent Agrarian) has argued that there is anything ennobling about spending sixteen hours a day looking at the wrong end of a horse. The danger is, rather, that the quest for community will blind dissenters to such preindustrial failings as xenophobia or patriarchal domination, and to the freedom offered by certain varieties of urban life

Some left historians, for example, have idealized rural or immigrant communities they would no doubt find suffocating to inhabit. Lytle underscores this difficulty when he speaks of the importance of family continuity: "You've got to have that old grandmother in the back room saying, 'Have your tongue pulled out before you lie,' don't you see?" Yes, I do see, and I admire that old woman, but something makes me want to say the hell with her hectoring moralism. Ancestral ties and customs can be burdensome as well as sustaining, especially now that so few people can accept tradition un-selfconsciously. As the Agrarians came to realize, a self-conscious recovery of tradition must always be contradictory and incomplete.

So it makes sense to try to have it both ways There is no longer cause to genuflect at the altar of progress; there is nothing inevitable about the spread of centralized bureaucracy or unrestrained industrial development The choice is not between rigid models of tradition and modernity, it is between stale "progressive" formulas and a more flexible critique of industrial capitalism The point is not to deify the preindustrial past but to imagine a culture diverse enough to contain individual freedom and mutual obligation, craziness and constraint—the *flâneur* on the boulevard and the grandmother in the back room. □